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Jim Garrison, who tried to prove JFK slaying conspiracy, dies at 70

Ex-New Orleans DA gained fame, drew criticism for efforts

By Lee Hancock
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Former Orleans Parish District Attorney Jim Garrison, who gained fame for his quixotic effort to prove a CIA conspiracy behind the Kennedy assassination, died Wednesday in his New Orleans home.

Mr. Garrison died of natural causes. He was 70. He had been ill for months with severe heart problems, according to a family friend.

Mr. Garrison served until last year as a judge on Louisiana's 4th Circuit Court of Appeals. He was elected to the bench in 1978, five years after losing his bid for a fourth term as district attorney to current Orleans Parish District Attorney Harry Connick.

His 12 years as district attorney were noted chiefly for his obsessive effort to prove that the CIA was behind the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Mr. Garrison also sought to uncover what he contended was a federal government plot to hide the conspiracy and pin the killing on a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald.

His theories led to the prosecution of prominent New Orleans businessman Clay

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Jim Garrison ... was a judge on Louisiana's 4th Circuit Court of Appeals.

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Shaw on a charge of conspiring to kill the president. The nationally publicized 1969 trial ended in Mr. Shaw's acquittal and forever colored Mr. Garrison's career.

"That's what people will think of, but I prefer to remember Jim the way he was from the early '60s," said former U.S. Attorney John Volz, one of Mr. Garrison's former assistants.

"I was very very impressed with Jim Garrison as a DA, his aggressiveness, his intelligence, his philosophy of law enforcement," he said. "I didn't always agree with Jim, especially in some aspects of the Kennedy investigation. But I could never accuse Jim of being insincere. I think he believed in what he was doing."

One of three books that Mr. Garrison wrote about the trial and his theories on the Kennedy assassination inspired Oliver Stone's controversial 1991 movie, *JFK*.

A large man with a distinctive stare and booming voice that made him a natural courtroom performer, Mr. Garrison enjoyed the controversy spawned by the Kennedy investigation, friends said.

"He was drawn to it," said John Gu[illegible], a retired court of appeals judge and close friend of Mr. Garrison's since the two attended law school together.

Associated Press

Jim Garrison and his wife, Liz, leave a federal court in New Orleans in 1973 afer he was acquitted of a bribery charge.

Mr. Garrison's dogged and often flamboyant pursuit of his conspiracy theory drew harsh criticism from lawyers and legal scholars, from federal officials and from many prominent New Orleans residents.

The trial also was considered a

humiliation because a jury took less than an hour to acquit Mr. Shaw after hearing evidence for 34 days.

"That was a low point of his term in office," said Mr. Connick. "To those of us who were familiar with his investigation, the indictment of Clay Shaw was a gross miscarriage of justice. It's not something that those of us who are aware of the facts are proud of."

Even so, Mr. Garrison came back to defeat Mr. Connick in a landslide in 1969, after Mr. Shaw was acquitted.

He was a very powerful politician because the person on the street, the average person, the minority groups, the less influential people, the little people in this society felt that he was their champion, Mr. Gulatta said.

Dave Bertel, one of Mr. Garrison's assistants during the Kennedy investigation, said the common New Orleans resident saw the former district attorney as "larger than life," even though he lost the case.

Mr. Garrison served during World War II as an artillery spotter pilot. He told friends that he decided to become an advocate for the underdog after seeing prisoners freed from a German concentration camp by Allied troops.

The Kennedy investigation was not his first brush with notoriety. Shortly after taking office in 1962, Mr. Garrison led a series of highly publicized raids on French Quarter gambling and prostitution dens.

He also took on the parish's judges, even taking the previously unheard-of step of campaigning against some of them.

But friends said he became obsessed with the Kennedy assassination after a chance conversation with then-Sen. Russell Long during a airplane flight from Washington, D.C.

The senator, whose father, political boss Huey Long, was gunned down in the Louisiana state capitol in 1935, expressed grave doubts about the Warren Commission report. The report, released by a presidential committee headed by U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, concluded that Oswald acted alone in killing the president.

Kevin Costner ... played Jim Garrison in the 1991 movie *JFK*, based on one of Mr. Garrison's books.

"I would say that conversation is the thing that really set Garrison in motion," Mr. Bertel said.

Mr. Garrison played the role of Justice Warren in the movie.

Even many friends ultimately rejected Mr. Garrison's conspiracy theories, and after he lost the trial, Mr. Garrison complained that his effort had been unfairly branded as an elaborate publicity bid.

"He felt that his intention was misunderstood. He was indeed sincere," Mr. Gulatta said.

But admirers said Mr. Garrison's effort raised questions about the assassination that lead many to reject the Warren Commission report.

"He's kind of my hero," said Larry Howard, director of the JFK Information Center in Dallas, an organization devoted to probing conspiracy theories about the assassination. "He's kept this case alive."

In 1973, Mr. Garrison was indicted by a federal grand jury on a charge of taking bribes to protect illegal pinball gambling. He was acquitted, but a month later, he lost his bid for a fourth term to Mr. Connick.